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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: poverty eradication

Statement submitted by International Association of Schools of Social Work, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Participation by people living in poverty is essential to all poverty eradication efforts. It is essential as a component of best practices and to ensure the sustainability of programmes, important in terms of human rights and useful as a practice that contributes to building human capacity.

People living in poverty can often provide the best wisdom on defining their needs, advising on what interventions would work and identifying the barriers that need to be overcome in poverty eradication efforts. The active collaboration of people at the grass-roots level with national and international experts can bring the best combination of knowledge and experience to the development of strategies to address poverty.

Participation as essential for effective poverty-eradication programmes

According to the August 2010 report of the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty on the draft guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights (A/HRC/15/41), extreme poverty cannot be eradicated if the life experiences of persons living in extreme poverty continue to be ignored in public debates. Persons living in extreme poverty must be considered part of the solution and their voices must be heard and properly considered at all stages of the design, implementation and evaluation of policies affecting them.

The lack of emphasis on participation is frequently cited as a barrier to social development and poverty eradication. In a survey on best practices for social integration conducted by the non-governmental organization Committee for Social Development in 2009-2010, the lack of participatory processes was cited as a significant barrier to progress both in developed and developing countries. As one respondent stated, there has been a failure to recognize the right of all to participate in decisions that affect their lives and a failure to promote regeneration and empowerment of local communities. Respondents to the survey, drawn from 62 countries, identified participation as one of five essential components of best practices for social integration. The survey respondents recommended that Governments increase the use of participatory democratic processes, involve citizens in decision-making, and build partnerships with non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. The recommendations apply equally to poverty eradication efforts.

Participation as essential for sustained progress

Only with the active involvement of the persons affected by poverty-alleviation and -eradication programmes can such programmes have a sustainable impact. People are more likely to invest their energy in programmes that reflect their needs and ideas. Only with the commitment of people living in poverty can the benefits of projects be sustained.

Participation as a human right

Social work and many other professions uphold the right of persons to make decisions about their own lives as a core value, and promote the active participation of all in public life. That principle is increasingly recognized as a core human right, essential to the maintenance of human dignity. It is related to widely recognized

rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly, as noted in the aforementioned report of the independent expert. Human rights conventions adopted by the United Nations include the right to participate. Examples include article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that persons with disabilities have the right to effectively and fully participate in public life and that Governments should actively encourage their participation, including participation in NGOs. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly recognizes the right of children to express their views and participate in decisions affecting their lives.

Participation as building human capital

Participation is part of the intervention process, as people gain skills and experience through participation. Such skills enable individuals and communities to initiate their own projects to improve their lives and better utilize government-supported services. Human capacity is therefore developed through participatory processes.

Examples of participation by persons living in poverty

The "neighbourhood parliaments" programme of India recommends that nations consider adapting a widely acknowledged State-sponsored model implemented in the Indian State of Kerala, aimed at eradicating absolute poverty in the State within 10 years. To develop social capital, the State was organized as *ayalkoottams* (neighbourhood assemblies or neighbourhood parliaments) of people in poverty, especially women. As a result, some 3,737,000 poor families have come together in 203,000 neighbourhood units, federated as 17,551 area units and 1,061 local governance-level units. Government departments ensured that their activities, wherever relevant, converged on such participatory structures. The Government and banks make money available, while people plan from below and ensure multidimensional development. They mobilized Rs.1,390.13 crores (a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to 10 million) as thrift and disbursed Rs.3,958.43 crores as loans to members. They also mobilized Rs.1,018.44 crores as credit from banks. The programme, called *kudumbashree*, led to the creation of 30,569 individual and 11,893 group enterprises aimed at income generation for poor families. A total of 46,444 poor families participated in programmes to lease land farming, and 62,655.2 acres of land were brought under cultivation. A total of 46,749 houses were constructed under the housing loan scheme for the poor in rural areas. The programme ensured governance participation and power-sharing by those usually excluded.

In the 1990s, Brazil initiated a rural poverty alleviation programme in collaboration with the World Bank. Key elements included decentralization to local communities to empower the poor and enable local involvement in decision-making, thereby building a sense of ownership at every level. Community associations identified and prioritized their own community needs and submitted proposals to municipal councils for assistance. It is noteworthy that 80 per cent of the members of the councils were required to be from poor rural communities and organizations. Technical assistance, training and funding were provided, but the community associations were responsible for implementing and maintaining the projects. This participatory approach, with an emphasis on the involvement of people living in

poverty, led to a greater sense of local ownership, a commitment to success and a vehicle for sustainability.

Recommendations

We urge Governments to:

- Ensure that the right of people, including those who are most vulnerable, to participate in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods is fully respected
- Promote and facilitate the participation in all phases of planning and implementation of programmes for people living in poverty and that people at the grass-roots level be consulted for their ideas on best practices
- Collaborate with civil society, including local NGOs working directly with those living in poverty
- Ensure an adequate flow of information to persons living in poverty, using diverse means to ensure that information reaches those who cannot read, do not have access to technology or face other barriers to the use of information
- Consider successful experiences such as the neighbourhood parliaments programme, and encourage grass-roots, neighbourhood-based, small-sized structures to engage people living in poverty as part of the poverty eradication process
- Provide essential basic services and social protection to persons living in poverty, those working in the informal sector and vulnerable groups in particular; persons whose basic needs are not met are unlikely to devote their energies to participatory processes

Note: The statement is endorsed by Sisters of Charity Federation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Council.